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Introduction

1 American author and radio personality Garrison Keillor has been described as "a brilliant writer, monologist and sometime crooner" and "arguably the biggest star in the world of public radio" (Smith, 2012; Carter, 2011). He is also listed as a "storyteller" on the popular American blog *The Moth*, home of a non-profit cultural organization devoted to oral storytelling. Besides hosting his acclaimed radio program *A Prairie Home Companion*, Keillor has published novels, short-story collections and poetry, and contributes columns and stories to the *New York Times*, *The New Yorker* and *National Geographic*, among others. His work blurs the boundary between novel, story and radio script, bringing in storytelling, song, and live performance from across the literacy/orality divide. Significantly, the *Prairie Home Companion* website displays all these forms of expression onto a single interface through its large interactive archive of audio, video, and written records.[1] Such a multimodal, dialogic setup reflects a profound reshaping of the "literate" in literature and puts forward storytelling as a legitimate form of art.

2 *A Prairie Home Companion* was first broadcast in 1974; it has been running ever since, and currently airs on syndicated public radios throughout the United States. The weekly program is modeled on old-fashioned formats and consists of folk and traditional music, drama segments, and, most prominently, a recurring storytelling segment narrated — never read— by Keillor, "The News from Lake Wobegon." It is broadcast live in theaters throughout the United States to promote local, contemporary singers and storytellers. Yet its deliberate nostalgia also suggests an ethnological concern for recording a fleeting traditional culture. At a time of global, homogenized communication, the program calls itself a "Home Companion," a parodic reference to the pre-television era, when radio was

considered an intimate medium —talking directly to the common man at home. The program's name is also a playful nod to the founding myths of Americana: the Frontier and the West, on the one hand, and the innocence and wholesomeness of rural life, on the other. Symbolically, *A Prairie Home Companion* sets out to recreate a shared sense of community based on the geographic, cultural and symbolic space of the "Prairie." Keillor's opening song translates the spirit of the program as a friendly, ritualized gathering rooted in American folklore.

> [MUSIC] I hear that old piano from down the Avenue/ I smell the roses, I look around for you,/ Oh my sweet, sweet sweet someone, coming through that door,/ It's Saturday and the band is playing,/ Honey could we ask for more. [END OF SONG] Coming to you live from the Fitzgerald Theater here on Exchange Street in downtown Saint Paul, it's *A Prairie Home Companion*, presented by American Public Media and produced by Prairie Home Productions... [this excerpt broadcast March 8, 2014].[2]

3 Keillor performs his opening song with minor but systematic variations in keeping with the broadcast location of each individual show. The song is adapted from a well-known jazz standard ("Tishomingo Blues," Spencer Williams, 1917), thus grounding the program in the popular roots of American culture. With folk, blues and country music and his weekly updated "News from Lake Wobegon," Keillor presents ordinary life as the crucial matter of artistic expression. At the same time, the program acknowledges its filiation with (written) literary traditions: the "Guy Noir, Private Eye" dialogue segment parodies the hard-boiled detective novel and its developments in the American genre of *Film Noir*. Keillor is a keen —albeit tongue-in-cheek— promoter of literate education on the program. He seldom fails to comment on the hardships and rewards of the English Literature student through edifying messages sponsored by his fictional Professional Organization of English Majors —to be found under the acronym "P.O.E.M." in the website archives.

4 Keillor's trademark storytelling segment, "The News from Lake Wobegon," transferred early on into his written work. His first novel, *Lake Wobegon Days* (1985) tells the story of the fictional town and its people, complete with founding history and religious rituals. Keillor's observation of everyday life and his fondness for the colorful language of the common man translate into his literary representation of orality in fiction. In his 1991 novel *Radio Romance*, Keillor goes one step further and makes orality the subject matter of his storyline. *Radio Romance* tells the story of a local radio station in downtown Minneapolis, from the early days of radio broadcasting to the arrival of television in the cultural landscape. Written in the form of a digressive reminiscence of old times past, the novel creates a *mise en abîme* of the question of orality, depicting the process of artistic creativity as a dialogic, collaborative enterprise of constant renewal and repetition, but also as a very literate labor of love. Through his comic depiction of radio at the dawn of a new cultural tradition, Keillor exposes the intricate relationship between the written and the spoken word, and makes this relationship the very structure of his novel.

5 The novel's title *Radio Romance* is semantically and syntactically ambiguous. The Merriam-Webster Dictionary lists four separate meanings for "romance." The first meaning refers to medieval romance, a tale or prose narrative "based on legend, chivalric love and adventure, or the supernatural." Today, this sense has come to denote a commercial genre of popular novels marketed to a female readership (the so-called "romance novels"). The second meaning, derived from its medieval origin, is "something that lacks basis in fact," which raises the question of fictionality. The third definition is that of "an

emotional attraction or aura belonging to an especially heroic era, adventure, or activity." Finally, a "romance" is a love affair. All these meanings bear relevance to the novel's basic plot and to the question of orality as "the other voice" of Keillor's literature. In medieval romance, oral folklore and the structure of oral-formulaic composition (Parry, 1971; Lord, 1968) are woven together with written prose and verse to create a narrative that blends history with myth. In *Radio Romance*, Keillor writes about radio storytelling —the oral delivery of scripted narratives— and contributes to the modern American myth of the "Golden Age of Radio." Keillor evokes the Old World together with the recent myths of the New; by inscribing, however evocatively, his novel in such a history, his title pays tribute to the influence of radio in shaping cultural identity, and hints at the close relationship between the "primary orality" of ancient traditions and the "secondary orality of mass electronic media" (Foley, 1986, 1). Another meaning of "romance" not listed in a common-usage dictionary but nonetheless known to musically-inclined English-speakers is the musical genre of romance: a lyrical, musical piece with a distinctly tender quality. From this perspective, *Radio Romance* is a love song; it uses the poetic tools of literature to celebrate the sound of the voice.

6 Keillor's chronicles of bygone radio days depict characters torn between their loyalty to their scripts/Scriptures and the unavoidable disturbances of real life within the studio. Through its comic representation of radio storytelling, *Radio Romance* leads us to question its own structure as a novel. First, *Radio Romance* is indeed a history of radio through the experiences and memories of those who made it. Radio matters are borne of everyday life; they reflect and shape a culture rooted in orality. However, Keillor's fictional WLT station is not simply a breeding ground for the development of regional and individual identities. As the blurred lines of radio life question the relationships between fiction and reality, Keillor exposes his grammar of storytelling through his multilayered, meta-fictional comedy. Finally, *Radio Romance* develops an aesthetic and ethical reflection on the experience of orality in the American imagination as a whole.

Perception: Radio Matters

7 The novel's first chapter is entitled "Studio B." It ushers us in a recording studio at the WLT Radio Station, whose complete location is given in the opening paragraph: "It was a big triangular room on the second floor of the Hotel Ogden, where WLT was located, at 12 th and LaSalle in downtown Minneapolis" (Keillor, 1992, 1). The stage is set with a regionally and culturally specific background. WLT is a "Friendly Neighbor Station" with a faithful local audience. From the start, Keillor's account is as much about the community as it is about the station which mirrors and entertains it. Entering the story from within in terms of space and action —while programs are being broadcast— places us in the position of the audience. The mysterious acronym WLT, only explained in Chapter 3, together with a long list of names of announcers and programs, create an effect of assumed knowledge on the part of the reader: we are drawn in as regular listeners of *Friendly Neighbor*, *Hope for Tomorrow*, *The Noontime News*, *Reflections*, *Afternoon Ballroom*, *Old WLT Barn Dance*, and *Story Hour with Grandpa Sam*. All these programs are mentioned within the first chapter, and their evocative names map out WLT's position in the cultural landscape of the community: news, sermons, music and storytelling are the defining features of the station. No date is mentioned in the first chapter, but the narrative tone and old-fashioned programs suggest a nostalgic reminiscence of old-time

radio. While nostalgia in itself is by no means a signifier of oral tradition, in this instance it contributes to the novel's emphasis on the passing down of memories as a cohesive social practice, while highlighting the responsibility of the storyteller towards his community of readers/listeners.

8 On the one hand, the novel opens as a nostalgic account of a community's history. On the other hand, it is from its incipit an unambiguous comedy based on the ludicrous anecdotes of radio programming. The "curse of Studio B," announced with the accents of a horror folk tale, turns into a farce: "Dad Benson (...) gasped for breath during *Friendly Neighbor* and two huge flies dove into his throat and almost choked him" (Keillor, 1992, 1). For audiences at home, the announcer's misfortune translates as faults and hitches in the flow of speech: "Reed Seymour once got the hiccups so bad in there his partial plate came off and he had to gum the news" (*Ibid.*, 1). Such anticlimactic scenes comically undermine the narrator's misplaced nostalgia. They do not, however, weaken the strong sense of mystery pervading the recording studio. There is no explanation to the elusive "curse of Studio B" and the narrator turns to mythological imagery: "when the [red and green neon's eyes] sparkled, the lights in Studio B dimmed. Only in B. Nowhere else. Gene the Chief Engineer checked the wiring. Nothing. It was a snakepit, that was all" (*Idem*, 3). The shortened, elliptic sentences emulate the slow articulation of a storyteller waiting for effect. The narrator's reference to the snake pit finally confirms his story's filiation with an ancient oral tradition beyond the confines of its geographical surroundings: the snake pit is a commonplace of folktales and myths in Native American and European culture. In the context of Minnesotan demographics in the early and mid-twentieth century —the community's Scandinavian and German roots are a recurring theme in the novel— this passage recalls Old Norse hero Gunnar of the 13th century Icelandic *Völsunga Saga*, who was thrown in a snake pit by Attila the Hun. At the end of the first chapter, we have identified the novel as a hybrid narrative drawing from oral and literate traditions, with popular tales and storytelling motifs on the one hand, and the meta-fictional irony of post-modern literature on the other. Keillor's subsequent portrait of the many characters in his radio landscape further refines the reader's first impression.

9 The WLT founders, brothers Ray and Roy Soderbjerg, are introduced in the second chapter, together with the full name of their radio station ("With Lettuce and Tomato"). Together, they embody small-town America in the golden age of radio. A business-minded Ray oversees the moral correctness of everything uttered on air, while his numerous extra-marital affairs are routinely spied on by the staff. This comic discrepancy provides an ironic commentary on the puritan tendencies of early radio broadcasting. Ray's brother Roy is an engineer and local inventor whose skills also humorously hint at radio history. As Susan J. Douglas explains in her account of exploratory listening in the 1920s, the early days of American radio were about "assembling a device, learning how to listen and what to listen to"; amateur radio was a manly world of mechanical creativity (Douglas, 2004, 57). Roy, a lonely inventor tinkering with outlandish creations in his farm, is a stereotype of the exploratory radio amateur of Midwest America in the 1920s and 30s.

> Roy was beavering away in his workshop on the farm, working on something he called a Resonance Radio, which would let a listener hear the broadcast voice as resonantly as his own, to give *listening* the same sensation as *speaking.* The Radio was constructed as a chair with big padded speakers mounted in the back and the headrest and in the arms, conducting sound directly through the torso. (Keillor, 1992, 212).

10 Radio is a family activity, whether it is performing, producing, or simply listening. Ray's hatred of the big broadcasters hints at the threatening power of CBS and NBC —who were themselves controlled by advertising agencies and their corporate clients by the 1930s (Douglas, 2004, 6). In the story, Ray is approached by a snobbish CBS representative from New York and turns him down:

> Minneapolis? A small town? You must be joking. I know what people around here want, Mr Manatee, and it's not a lot of lazy, overpaid, overaged New York prima donnas, no thank you. (...) We've got something better here, we've got spunk and talent and the old get up and go. (...) I'm what you might call a small-town kind of guy. (Keillor, 1992, 36).

11 Ray's refusal to give in to corporate business reflects his concern for the wholesomeness of radio as a family entertainment. He is nevertheless forced to bring in commercial announcers in order to keep the radio financially viable, despite his deep-seated reluctance: "Ray and Roy had felt that out-and-out selling on the radio would offend people. Radio was sacred, mysterious, and people talked about it in hushed tones (...). To use such a gift and a godsend to peddle soap —would people stand for it?" (*Idem*, 37). The WLT founders are torn between the lure of profit and the virtuous tradition of storytelling and music. Such contradictions run through the novel, comically enhancing the paradoxes of a society on the brink of mass-mediated global culture.

12 At WLT, announcers, engineers, secretaries and the many workers of the station negotiate their glamorous status with the behind-the-scenes reality of everyday drudge. Beyond the lively drama, music and news reports are technicians honing their craft, as the aptly named "Uncle Art" reminds us. When Art's young nephew, Francis With, visits a broadcasting studio for the first time, he is awe-struck by the amount of technique required to produce natural sounding speech and music:

> *This was were it all came from* – the engineers at the control board, three of them, one to man the big black volume knobs, one to run the turntables and cue the commercials, and a big fat man behind a podium with a green gooseneck lamp on it, who talked over a microphone mounted on a brass ring around his neck to the sound effects man in the studio. (Keillor, 1992, 82).

13 While technique is a prerequisite of radio storytelling, the audience is its crucial enabler. Listeners of the "Friendly Neighbor Station" often confuse loyalty and reactivity with obsession and intrusiveness. This leads to many comic scenes but, more importantly, it shows the dialogic nature of radio. Programs result from the cooperation between scriptwriters, technicians and announcers, and from the listeners' reactions and comments in the form of letters and messages. When Ray decides that he wants to get rid of the Little Becky character on *Friendly Neighbor* because the actress, cranky teenager Marjery Moore, has antagonized all her fellow performers, the writer's response is final: "Ray, we got five hundred letters about that show. Most popular we've ever done" (Keillor, 1992, 74). Although commercial sponsors have the final say, the audience plays a decisive role in the shaping of stories and musical programs. Similarly, when the audience loses interest in a story, performers find themselves high and dry: "Times change. Popularity changes. People like you for a while and then they want something else. That's a hell of a hard fact for a performer to accept" (Keillor, 1992, 272). In *Radio Romance*, however, listeners are not just partners in the storytelling game: they are reflected in the radio representation of their lives. Francis With is one such listener; he loves WLT because he strongly identifies with its star program, *Friendly Neighbor*:

> As usual, he (...) slid into the kitchen chair at one minute of twelve, just in time for the WLT chimes that signaled *Friendly Neighbor*. The chimes sounded exactly like Mother's big wall clock that bonged in the hall, and so he had always imagined that the Benson family lived in an old dark house like theirs and that the Bensons' kitchen table had a blue checked oilcloth on it and sat by the window looking at the muddy backyard and the Bensons' linoleum was faded green too (...). (Keillor, 1992, 87).

14 For Francis, the evocative power of the program lies in the intimate quality of the story, its inspiration in the everyday reality of small-town folks, and most importantly, in the power of the performer's voice:

> (...) it was a beautiful idea, so simple. The show opened as daughter Jo (...) was fixing lunch. (...) Then Jo said, "There he is now!" and the door opened and in came Dad, to sit and reminisce about old times and quote a few adages and recite a poem and talk to the listeners in a voice as natural and homey as if they were right there, and of course to keep asking for another cup of that *good coffee*. The show thrived from the first instant, thanks to Dad's voice: that warm dry Minnesota voice with a slight burr, a little catch in it, a little hesitation that got the listener leaning forward. Mail poured in. (Keillor, 1992, 44).

15 *Friendly Neighbor* brings together the strands of oral and written traditions, and displays them through the intimacy of a singular, familiar voice. The sincerity of storytelling has not yet been overcome by the demands of commercial radio —although the "good coffee" is an ironic hint at the show's sponsor. *Friendly Neighbor* becomes a symbol of the community, as its chimes rhythm the daily lives of its listeners. Garrison Keillor depicts radio storytelling as a ritualized part of life, as unavoidable as church and work: "*Friendly Neighbor* with Dad Benson, the Old Lunchtime Philosopher, came on the air at noon (...) and wherever you were back then, everything stopped" (Keillor, 1992, 68). Keillor's humorous yet affectionate portrait of early radio gives us an anthropological view of the power of the voice. In this soundscape of storytelling, radio stands as a metaphor for all forms of literary enterprises, and spells out literature's function: to represent the sounds of life.

Representation: The Grammar of Storytelling

16 Because radio stories are so close to those of real-life listeners, and because WLT employees are local Midwesterners like their audience, radio discourse often blurs the line between the fictional and the real. The tragic death of Francis With's father in a locomotive accident is thus paralleled with the fictional demise of characters on the WLT radio shows —with the added irony that, in *Radio Romance*, all narrative levels are equally fictional. At WLT, Ray's concerns about morality stem from his keen awareness that radio confuses fiction with realitywhen written literature and cinema do not:

> There's a difference. You go to a play, you have to *go* someplace. When it's over, you come home. You read a book, you hold it in your hand, you can see it's only writing. Radio, it's right in the home. You turn it on and everybody else has to shut up. A movie is just a picture, but people think that radio is real. They think that it's *real*. (Keillor, 1992, 75).

17 Chapter 10 of the novel, entitled "Real People," focuses on the listeners' confusion between reality and fiction:

> The friends and neighbors in radioland thought of the Bensons as real people, as Patsy [the show's writer] discovered after Frank complained about Jo's bee-

> hormone compound costing three dollars and the show received $440.28 in three days, grimy dollar bills clipped to letters that said, 'Honey, you go buy any kind of bee compound you want. We love you'. (Keillor, 1992, 76).

18 The WLT writers use this confusion to raise substantial donations for charity by bending their stories to their needs. When the Salvation Army calls for warm coats, an episode of *Friendly Neighbor* has Dad Benson give his coat to a beggar and remark, "That man must've needed it more than me" (Keillor, 1992, 77): this prompts listeners to send coats to the station for "Dad," who then turns them over to the Salvation Army. Keillor also uses the fiction/reality discrepancy for comic purposes when he describes nonsensical off-the-air conversations between fans and performers:

> "How is your back doing?" a woman asked.
> Dad looked puzzled. She said, "You strained it last week pushing Pops Simpson's car out of the snow."
> "*Oh*," he said. "My *back*. Yes, it's fine. Just a strain." (Keillor, 1992, 84).

19 Since listeners view *Friendly Neighbor* as a bona fide account of the Bensons' life, performers find themselves tied to their radio persona outside the fictional frame of on-air drama. This again leads to comic discrepancies when the performers' visual appearance is at odds with the listeners' mental image of their characters. Little Becky, Dad Benson's innocent eight-year-old foster child, is played by Marjery Moore, a rude fourteen-year-old girl who "smoke[s] Camels, half a pack a day, and sw[ears] like a cowboy" (Keillor, 1992, 73). Since Marjery cannot physically stay in character outside the studio, she turns her avoidance of meet-and-greet sessions into a consistent trait of her fictional persona, thus furthering the illusion to satisfy her radio audience: "She's kind of shy, you know. And she was in a hurry to get back to school. But she told me to say hello to you and to say thank you for your letters" (*Idem*, 85).

20 Only those working in radio know what to expect, as Frank discovers when he starts his job at WLT:

> [character] Lily was young and lovely, coquettish, a true romantic, one of those gloriously cheerful young women who fly through life untouched by sorrow or dismay, but [performer] Lottie was fifty-four years old, big and squat, riding in a wheelchair, her face dark and bloated, her eyes black slits, her hair like wisps of moss. (Keillor, 1992, 242).

21 Yet for the artist, the conscious game of make-believe enhances rather than deflates the creative experience. Frank's coming of age as a performer thus coincides with his growing awareness of the art at work behind the seemingly natural flow of radio fiction. After he sees the real faces of the *Friendly Neighbor* performers, his passion for stories turns to the craft itself: "Now that he had seen into the studio and knew that none of this was true, it made the show more exciting" (*Idem*, 87); the power of fiction remains intact. At WLT, expectations set up in fiction gradually overtake real life, so that storytellers and programmers are drawn in by the demands of the narrative; it is because Marjorie and Lottie so little resemble their angelic radio personas that Ray wants to eliminate their characters and fire them. This brings us to the specific effect of oral delivery in fiction: because there is no distinction between the voice of the storyteller-performer and that of his fictional persona, because there is no visual frame —book, screen, theatrical stage— denoting fiction, radio storytelling is inherently ambiguous. Orson Welles became a victim of this structural ambivalence in 1938 when he narrated an adaptation of H. G. Wells's *War of the Worlds.* Welles had announced the fictional frame at the outset, but

listeners who had missed the first few minutes of the show were tricked by the ensuing realism of the narrative.

22 Keillor translates this ambiguity in his writing by collapsing narrative levels into one, so that scenes of "real life" overlap with the scripted stories of the radio programs: "When Dotty returned to Chicago, Having put a tremor in Bud's voice and glamored up the poky people of Green Corners, Maria moved to *Friendly Neighbor* where Dad felt a young actress might settle Marjery down" (Keillor, 1994, 220). This single sentence takes us from a fictional story aired on the radio (Dotty is the character read by Maria in WLT's *The Best is Yet to Be*) to WLT's actual work schedule. Keillor plays with the referentiality of proper names, using names of radio characters and places (Dotty, Bud, Green Corners) alongside the names of their performers (Maria, Dad, Marjery). This further complicates our understanding of the plot as a whole, prompting us to reflect on the question of fictionality in performance and storytelling. While performers must operate a voice shift in order to break character and reveal themselves behind the fiction (Goffman, 1981, 237), the printed page can signal a change of narrative frame through typographical formatting. However, Keillor visually blends all narrative levels in the body of the text to recreate the experience of radio listening.

23 At WLT, the confusion is complete when announcers assume pseudonyms on and off the air. When Francis With takes on the name "Frank White," he invests it with a life-changing power. As if to confirm this, Keillor's third-person narrative adopts the new name, turning shy schoolboy Francis into urbane radio announcer Frank: "His name now a known radio name. People in Mindren mentioning to their friends, 'I was listening to Frank White on the radio today,' not knowing it was Francis With" (Keillor, 1994, 269). Keillor's characters reveal the fictionalizing power of radio, as they find themselves trapped in the life their fictional universe has laid out for them. When performer Faith Snelling (the voice of Jo in *Friendly Neighbor*) announces that she wants to leave the show to pursue a theatrical career, she is bluntly rebuffed (Keillor, 1992, 283):

> you can't quit the show. You're Jo. Nobody else can *be* Jo. Everybody *knows* Jo. She's got to *be* there, on the radio. You can't just go and murder a friend of five-hundred-thousand people because you *feel* like it.

24 While Faith is really not Jo, she is morally bound to her fictional character: at the end of the chapter, she renounces her career on the stage and remains "on the air."

25 Keillor emphasizes the power of fiction by grounding his own narrative within a pragmatic frame of claimed truthfulness and personal memory, in a parodic nod to traditional storytelling. Yet beyond the ritualized, disingenuous formulas, reality sometimes violently disrupts fiction. When the affair between Dad Benson and his on-air daughter Jo comes out at WLT, with Jo's fictional husband played by her real-life husband Dale, things take a turn for the worse after Dad Benson misreads a line. Here is what listeners hear next:

> FRANK: Where did I spend my *seed* last night?
> DAD: I mean ...
> FRANK: You're one to talk, ya big letch – how about you keep your hand off my *wife!*
> JO: (Burst into tears)
> DAD: What?
> (*Slap*)
> TINY: Mornin' everybody! Howdy, Miz Jo! Lawd, but them pancakes smell good! Hooo- eee! (Keillor, 1992, 334).

26 Before Tiny diverts the conversation, we have witnessed an on-air revelation of adultery and incest. While this scene parodies the old literary tradition of the comedy of manners, it also shows that radio fiction is never immune to the turmoils of everyday life, precisely because its performance hits so close to home.

27 *Radio Romance* only fleetingly mentions the "news broadcast" in which Frank White makes his career debuts. Although the novel ends with Frank becoming the news anchor of a Chicago TV station, news segments do not take center stage in Keillor's narrative, except for an account of the news WLT almost forgot to broadcast —the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor: "a young guy named Babe Roeder was on duty when the news came over the wire and he hesitated to put it on the air right away because he'd gotten burned by a practical joke a few months before" (*Ibid.*, 199). Keillor humorously suggests that a storyteller's tale elicits more trust than a fresh-of-the-wire news flash. Dad Benson finally announces the news:

> Dad sat in Studio B, the old mausoleum, and told people what was happening and talked in his quiet way about how awful war is but we can only live in peace if our neighbors are willing. But if Hitler and the Emperor wanted war, then they would have it, and though it would be a long hard struggle and there would be sacrifices, we would come through on top because Americans always pull together. Pop and the *Melody Hotel* gang worked up a version of 'There's a Star-Spangled Banner Flying over Home Sweet Home' and it was so tremendous and rousing that nobody remembered we were almost an hour late with the news. (Keillor, 1992, 201).

28 Timeliness is irrelevant in this context: Dad's quiet, timeless voice turns the news into another chapter in the great American story. Similarly, the song and music carry a ring of truth that a factual report utterly lacks. It is this capacity for emotional truthfulness that Keillor celebrates through his representation of radio storytelling. When Frank's father dies in a train crash, there is no news report. The story finds its way to the radio much later, in the form of a sung narrative ballad: Frank's father enters the collective history of the community through storytelling. The ballad episode marks a new departure in Frank's life; at the meta-narrative level, it prompts the reader to reflect on the importance of collective memory and storytelling in the making of a community.

29 *Radio Romance* exposes the complex grammar of storytelling: the literary qualities of radio rest on the thin line between reality and fiction; its poetic and emotional truthfulness demonstrates the aesthetic power of the voice as both an inspiration and a literary medium in its own right. Another layer must now be added to this complex picture: radio broadcasting is a form of "secondary orality," a technical prowess created by literate societies and largely relying on the written word. Scripts, sermons, newscasts, lyrics and musical scores are the barebones of oral speech and music on the radio. With writing comes authorship and the question of legitimacy; as the ambiguous relationship between the spoken and the written word plays out on the radio stage, Keillor finally steers his novel towards a reflection on the moral responsibility of the writer in the age of mass media, and offers us an aesthetic and ethical view of contemporary storytelling.

Weaving the Strands of Oral Experience: An Ethics of Storytelling

30 Ray Soderbjerg worries about the morality of his radio station. His awareness of the influence of radio on listeners makes him all the keener to uphold moral standards in

case people might emulate what they hear on the radio: "You want all the kiddoes to hate their dads? (...) Kids should run away from home so life can be like it is on the radio?" (*Ibid.*, 75). Because radio speaks from the intimacy of the home, it bears a great responsibility: "Newspapers printed editorials about 'the Responsibility of Radio' and urged the new industry to follow a path of sober adherence to solemn duty" (*Ibid.*, 37). Keillor draws from the atmosphere surrounding American broadcasting in the 30s, recalling, among others, the backlash to Orson Welles's 1938 *War of the Worlds*. In his study of the show's reception in the national press, Joseph Campbell describes how newspapers, sensing the competition, urged radio to "behave," demanding that a censorship board be setup to hold its mystifying powers at bay (Campbell, 2010, 40). In *Radio Romance*, Ray Soderbjerg fears the corruptive power of radio, and his obsession with sexual and blasphemous references is consistent with the puritanical morals of his time. As his nephew Roy Jr. explains, a slip of the tongue rarely goes unnoticed on the radio:

> out in radioland, all the friends and neighbors woke up in a flash. There they were, dithering around the kitchen, when suddenly this deep horrible voice three feet away says *asshole*. It's like the escaped rapist is sitting by the toaster holding a shotgun on them. (Keillor, 1992, 230).

31 Blasphemy and sex are such foundational taboos at WLT that, when an uninvited Mr Pokey sings "Baby, I Got a Big Wiener for Your Bun" on *The Sunrise Waffle Show*, word gets out that "Ray Soderbjerg, on hearing it at home, had collapsed in the bathtub and died" (*Idem*, 326).

32 Keillor stages these comic mishaps to hint at another issue: at WLT, "bad language" is equated with orality and measured against the standard of the written word. Announcers are at fault when they veer off script and risk falling into the errors and stammer of spontaneous speech. Erving Goffman has shown how in ordinary interaction, mistakes are extremely frequent but seldom noticed, because co-speakers constantly adjust to the evolving purpose of their conversation (Goffman, 1981, 240). Since the radio lacks face-to-face interaction with listeners, such slips become noticeable "faults" disturbing the expected fluidity of the announcer's articulation. The announcer's task is therefore a very elaborate form of make-believe, "the production of seemingly faultless fresh talk" (Goffman, 1981, 242; Goffman uses the term "fresh" in the sense of "spontaneous"). Since faultless fresh talk does not exist, the announcer is *de facto* only enacting a performed reading of his script. Writers are therefore the backbones of all radio programs, such as workaholic Patsy Konopka at WLT:

> Patsy created *Arthur Fox, Detective* and *Another World* and *The Lazy W Gang* and many more, writing a hundred pages a day, automatically, without trying to make it shine. It just came out (...) you should take what you can wherever it's available, a story from the newspaper, from novels, from other radio shows, but her main stimulus was time. The approach of a deadline inspired her. (Keillor, 1992, 66).

33 This passage undermines the idea that writing is a philosophically deep, protracted endeavor shaping "what comes out" into art. On the contrary, Patsy's free-flowing mode of writing resembles Goffman's "fresh talk," a spontaneous, creative improvisation sharing the immediacy of ordinary speech. This contrasts with the constrained performance of radio announcers who cannot do without their script. When Patsy accidentally leaves a draft version of "risqué" narrative in the official script of *Friendly Neighbor*, Dad Benson and his co-performers find themselves unable to improvise:

> WLT performers were strictly cold readers, one and all. The notion of rehearsals was foreign to them. It was a matter of pride to stroll into the studio in time to pour

> a cup of coffee, drink it, pick up the script, glance at it, and when the red light went on, do what the words said to do. (...) And now, drifting down the stream of dialogue that had suddenly become a rapids, the cast backpedalled, reading slowly ... with long pauses ... trying to read ahead. "My late mother used to earn money dancing, but only in polka contests there in Windom. She won $25 once," said Dad, saying each word separately as his eye scanned to the bottom of the page and the top of the next. *When would he need to abandon script and maybe tell a story about his mother—"Speaking of my mother reminds me of the time..." But what time did it remind him of? What mother stories had he told recently? And would Maria know enough to abandon script too?* (Keillor, 1992, 222-223).

34 Abandoning script is like abandoning ship: it means diving into the unknown without a safe story to land on. Dad Benson's awareness of his own inability as an independent storyteller reveals the widening gap between the ancient traditions of storytelling and the practices of radio narratives. His temporary panic echoes Ray's nostalgia for a time before radio:

> Radio had destroyed the world of his youth, beautiful Minnesota hail to thee —who cared about that now with radio coming in from everywhere? No local pride, no hometown heroes except crooners and comedians and all-around numbskulls. (...) the old fellows who told stories about their adventures in the North Woods in logging days and how they shipped out on an ore boat when they were seventeen and went to Brazil, the guys who had *lived* were fading away, gone broke, replaced by the big shirts created by advertising. (Keillor, 1992, 51).

35 It is advertising, not radio, that destroys traditional oral culture, by obscuring the inspirations of real-life experience and the memory of myths. Keillor derides the growing commercial culture of mass-communication in his novel, yet he still paints an overall positive picture of the period. Much like his *Prairie Home Companion* broadcast, which regularly parodies old-fashioned commercials, Keillor's *Radio Romance* denounces greed but does not reject radio, clearly believing, like an ambivalent Ray Soderbjerg, in its "enormous potential for good, its power to bridge great distances and reach great multitudes and promote mutual understanding and world peace" (Keillor, 1992, 37).

36 Furthermore, Keillor shows that the stereotypical opposition between orality and the written word is irrelevant and fruitless. In the early days of WLT, Ray Soderbjerg realizes with horror that "After a year they had broadcast more words than Shakespeare ever wrote, most of it small talk, chatter, rat droppings" (*Idem*, 29). Ray measures the flow of live radio speech against a canonical centerpiece of world literature, thus deliberately placing radio in an inferior position, and forgetting two things: the function of his "Home in the air" for everyday listeners, and, ironically, the crucial importance of orality in Shakespeare's work. His philosophically inclined brother Roy offers another interpretation for the difficult position of radio as a newcomer in an already established literate culture:

> Radio (...) was a raw primitive device that unfortunately had been discovered too late. In the proper order of things, it should have come somewhere between the wheel and the printing press. It belonged to the age of bards and storytellers who squatted by the fire, when all news and knowledge was transmitted by telling. Coming at the wrong time, radio was inhibited by prior developments, such as literature. (...) If only radio had come first, it would have kept poetry and drama and stories in the happy old oral tradition and poets would simply be genial hosts who chant odes and lays instead of a bunch of nervous jerks like T. S. Eliot. Radio could have *saved* literature, but instead, literature had imprisoned radio in literature's own disease, like an editor who asks the writer to take out all the funny parts. (Keillor, 1992, 145-146).

37 Roy's pessimistic view is also a harsh judgment on the nature and function of canonical Western literature. For Roy, literature is nefarious because it is cut off from life. His comic contrast between the "genial hosts" of a lively tradition and the "nervous jerks" of abstruse modernism brings up a parallel debate: the traditional opposition of low versus high culture. While Ray has internalized the disdain of highbrow literate traditions towards forms of creativity they consider of a lower kind, Roy takes the opposite stance and professes his hatred of elitist literature. Keillor's own stance lies in between, as he attempts to reconcile literariness with life. This translates in the material layout of his book.

38 *Radio Romance* consists of forty-two short chapters, some already published separately as individual stories; the novel is not an indivisible entity but as an aggregate sum of fragmented pieces. Consequently, Keillor's description of radio life is a digressive journey through the anecdotes of his many characters. The digressive and often elliptic aspect of the narrative is in keeping with the structure of an oral tale: the unfolding of stories follows the narrator's memory and free-flowing stream of consciousness. The novel thus starts with a description of Studio B before going back in time to the founding of the station by the Soderbjerg brothers. This leads to an account of the Soderbjerg family history and ancestry, and to an overview of the State's demographics in the 1920s. There is also a sense of democracy in Keillor's characters, since Francis/Frank, the main protagonist, appears late in the novel and is overshadowed by the many other characters taking turns on the WLT stage. Keillor's writing largely relies on direct speech and dialogue. It also includes many internal, stream-of-consciousness passages, while juggling the full range of speech registers, from formal to slang and local dialect. Keillor uses the full potential of the printed page, inserting script-like passages, verse poems, ballads and songs in his text. He acknowledges both the literary cannon and the repertoire of the North and West American folklore. With its concrete, visual layering of script, dialogue and third-person narrative, Keillor's hybrid text represents the complexity and variety of creative language.

39 Ultimately, the dilemma embodied by Ray and Roy is left unresolved. However parodic and self-conscious, the novel remains a "Radio Romance," an ode to the poetry of radio and to the complex relationship between spoken and written literature. Ironically, the most sacred representation of the written word finds itself on the radio when Father Ptashne broadcasts Mass "on Sunday morning, in the dual role of celebrant and play-by-play announcer" (Keillor, 1992, 261). As the priest solemnly celebrates Mass, we are reminded that the quintessential ritual based on the sacred book of Christian culture is an oral performance: "'I now greet the congregation,' he whispered into the microphone as if covering a tennis match, and then thundered, 'DOMINUS VOBISCUM'" (*Ibid.*, 261). Capital letters signal the priest's voice-shift in the scene, and at the meta-narrative level, they represent the communion between spoken and written words in the celebration of the religious office. The purpose of the written word in literature, then, is not solely to bridge our aesthetic longing for a transcendental awareness, but to bring the sacred back to the poetry of everyday life. Keillor does just that in his novel: by taking radio storytelling as the inspiration for his literary musings, he celebrates the closeness between art and life, orality and literacy, literariness and the experience of the everyday. Frank's realization of what radio should strive for finally reveals Keillor's own ethics of literature:

> Reed wanted to do something worthy with his life, like write books. He had part of a manuscript in his desk drawer. Frank had read it. Very intense, very poetic. *And very hard going*. Vesta wanted to bring in the treasures of the world and display them on the air, like opening a museum and showing postcards of the Venus de Milo. No, radio was a cinch if you kept reaching down and grabbing up handfuls of the ordinary. *Keep your feet on the ground.* (Keillor, 1992, 281).

40 In 2007, Keillor was awarded a John Steinbeck award, for capturing "the spirit of Steinbeck's empathy (...) and belief in the dignity of the common man." In *Radio Romance* and throughout his radio and written work, Keillor makes the case for grounding literature in the experience of the ordinary, thus championing the centrality of oral traditions in the American literary imagination. Now a part of contemporary American folklore, Keillor's work pays tribute to the roots of American culture, in the traces of Twain, Hemingway and Steinbeck, and celebrates the richness and complexity of storytelling in a literate culture of the spoken word.

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NOTES

1. http://prairiehome.publicradio.org/ [consulted March 27, 2014].
2. http://prairiehome.publicradio.org/programs/2014/03/08/ [consulted March 27, 2014].

ABSTRACTS

This article examines the writing of orality in the novel *Radio Romance*, by American author and radio personality Garrison Keillor. *Radio Romance* tells the story of the golden age of radio in America, at a time when oral traditions compete with the superior status of the written word. Keillor depicts radio storytelling as a dialogic process grounded in the everyday life of the community. The strong, empathic attachment of listeners to radio stories and voices raises the question of the complex relationship between fiction, writing and the spoken word. Keillor's reflection on the power of fiction finally leads him to an ethics of storytelling, and to the necessary communion between orality and the written word in the American literary imagination.

Cet article examine l'écriture de l'oralité dans le roman de l'auteur contemporain Américain Garrison Keillor, *Radio Romance.* Keillor retrace l'époque de l'âge d'or de la radio à Minneapolis, une époque marquée par des traditions orales anciennes et nouvelles, mais aussi par le statut symbolique dominant de l'écrit. Keillor décrit le processus dialogique à l'œuvre dans la création radiophonique, son ancrage et son influence dans la vie quotidienne des auditeurs. Les liens complexes entre oralité, écriture et fictionnalité s'élaborent à travers le rapport fusionnel des auditeurs aux voix invisibles de la radio. La question du pouvoir de la fiction nous mène finalement à une réflexion éthique sur le récit littéraire, et à son rapport organique à l'oralité et au langage ordinaire.

INDEX

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